



Invisible Representation: The Oral Contours of a National Popular Cinema

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Amplifying the weight of the nation: Nargis in (and as) *Mother India*



Nation-states are incomplete regions for the purposes of analyzing cinema. Neither from a production nor a consumption standpoint do political boundaries sufficiently divide, group, or structure world cinema. If global cinema is more than the sum of all the national cinemas, then the task confronting us is to develop a set of regions more meaningful and more powerful in explaining the phenomenon as a communications medium.

— Gerald M. McDonald, in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle*

Sheila J. Nayar

Invisible Representation

The Oral Contours of a National Popular Cinema



Orality Invisible

The theme of social inclusion as it relates to media readily anticipates consideration of race, gender, class, and other such visible markers of identity. But what about *invisible* modes of identification and representation that link outwardly divergent cultures and groups? In other words, though film may be a visual medium, not everything that determines one's representation on screen is necessarily related to sight. Too often we limit our assessment of how viewers are being socially excluded from the media experience on the basis of physical *presence*, neglecting other seminal ways in which groups or, indeed, entire subcultures, such as that of the subaltern,¹ may be finding representation—and not always in a manner wedded to national or linguistic boundaries.

Take, for example, the case of a Nigerian villager who has never left the confines of his or her community, yet finds an Indian popular film—seen without the benefit of subtitles or dubbing—completely comprehensible, even culturally *familiar*.² Indeed, a film as “indigenous” and “nationalistic” as *Mother India* (1957) continues to be embraced by audiences of other nations and races and languages and histories, as if it were in fact recounting the story of Mother Nigeria, or Mother Egypt, or of Romany Gypsies in Eastern Europe or Swahili-speaking girls in Zanzibar.³

To be sure, scholars have speculated (albeit often only in passing) as to why such disparate nations identify so intensely with these Hindi-language popular films—films which are, incidentally, frequently ridiculed by critics for their *masala* (“spice-mix”) blend of tawdry escapism, formulaic storytelling, and narratively irrelevant song-and-dance numbers. Some analysts have (also in passing) attributed this peculiar transcultural identification to a parallel experience of modernization encroaching on traditional society (one of the films' common themes). Others maintain it derives from a mutual privation that privileges escapist melodrama and the presentation of a material utopia, while still others contend that it is born of shared family values, or of poorer nations' inability to afford better, more substantive entertainment. (These Bollywood films are, after all, comparatively cheap entertainment imports.) These are of course all reasonable theories and under no circumstances invalid.⁴ But is it not possible that in our commitment to that which we can readily measure with pens and computers, or support through an intellectual reasoning carefully organized and modified on paper, a much broader infrastructure of identification has been missed?

My mention of these instruments of writing and the processes that accompany them is not solely rhetorical. It relates significantly to the theory I want to suggest here. Indeed, I think one of the reasons we may have neglected this other possibility is that—by virtue of the technologies we possess—we are, in actual fact, more *same* than different. That is, one thing binds us (for, if you are reading this, you are one of “us”—irrespective of your race, your culture, your gender, or your class). This one thing fundamentally separates and distinguishes us from millions of others (from 300 million such people in India alone), and thus makes this invisible transcultural identity that much harder to conceptualize, let alone to identify. I am speaking here of literacy—of our literacy, and hence of the non-literacy of others—and of the cognitive consequences of this as they apply to an individual's comprehension, organization, and experience of the world.

Why might a Nigerian villager who has never left his or her village call a film like *Mother India* culturally familiar and completely comprehensible? Perhaps it is because such movies do not take the form of a literacy-driven object. Instead, the conventional Indian popular film possesses clear characteristics of oral performance and orally transmitted narratives, conspicuously sharing traits with, for example, Homeric epic and the Indian *Mahabharata*. It is a cultural product that has been historically circumscribed by the psychodynamics of orality—that is, by the thought processes and personality structures that distinguish a non-writing mindset, and, as such, it is a product that employs specific devices and motifs that are traditionally part of orally based storytelling.⁵

Though English and humanities scholar Walter Ong contends in his seminal book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*⁶ that the characteristics that distinguish oral narrative are somehow of the past, receding (though perhaps residually still apparent in modern times), this may not be the case. It may simply be that, up till now, there has been no comprehensive application of the orality-literacy paradigm to visual media. Studies have been limited more or less exclusively to the anthropological study of oral peoples and to the investigation of the oral presence as it appears (or is disappearing) in *written* texts. In recent years, for example, there has been a noticeable shift from the study of orality as reflected in print to an interest in and focus on its consequences for computer and Internet communication.⁷ A legitimate transition, to be sure, but one that is still grounded in the *written* word.



Rajendra Kumar, Sunil Dutt (top left),
and Nargis in *Mother India*—
an “indigenous” film with global reach

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But visual narrative is like written narrative, in the sense that it too is a text and hence requires a kind of “reading.” And perhaps, in order to be comprehended or appreciated, some cinematic narrative forms require of their spectators what Roland Barthes has referred to as a “writerly” mindset.⁸ But what if an individual does not possess such a mindset? What if, due to her or his functioning in a non-literate or low-literate or oral-privileging environment, s/he does not have the cognitive skills required? Of course, those of us who are readers, who are citizens of print, “are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe.”⁹ But an oral person absorbs and organizes, and retains and recalls, information differently. For instance, s/he cannot organize thoughts with syntactical sophistication (for it is literacy that turns one’s thought processes into more complicated shapes). In such a universe, the knower is incapable of being separated from the known,¹⁰ and as such, his or her relationship to the world, to the group, and to the

self is radically different from that of the person who can search a computer for data, or read about a character’s psychological struggle, or even look up a street name on a city map.

So, where does one “reside” when life is inhabited without the benefit of text? What is history when it exists bereft of documented and verifiable facts? What can one remember—indeed, how *must* one remember—in order not to forget?

I am not trying to propose that there is some distinct and definitive split between “oral” and “literate” films, nor some great fixed opposition between orality and literacy—or, worse yet, between literate and illiterate. But certainly the number of years that the average student in the United States must devote to honing a “higher order of thinking”¹¹—some 15 to 20, if one counts college—attests to the length, breadth, and complexity of acquiring a literate mindset.

Imagine, then, a film industry such as Bombay’s, whose primary mission these past 50 years has been profit; to be sure, it is in such an industry’s interest to

reach the largest audience possible. Now, imagine that this is an audience with a historically significant percentage of non- and low-literate viewers, and also one not bound by a serviceable lingua franca. (Significantly, only one-third of Indians are native Hindi speakers.) What does an industry of this type do? If it's savvy, it shapes its product into one that satisfies the greatest numbers. And orally based characteristics of thought and storytelling would not only make a visual product accessible to the oral mindset; given that they are generally seen as more elemental, more universal, perhaps even more natural, they would also render a visual product more "readable" to those unschooled in the spoken language of the film. No wonder, then, that such films have been popular in nations with significant numbers of non- or low-literate viewers. True, India's recently expanded upper-middle class, in conjunction with a wealthier audience of Indians abroad, is starting to make subtle inroads into the Bollywood film formula landscape. But the films that succeed with *non-elite* audiences (i.e., rural, uneducated) rarely depart from the oral latticework.

So, let us examine some of these oral particulars. Their presence can be seen in some of the industry's biggest hits of the past five decades, including *Mother India*, *Sholay* (*Flames*, 1975), *Khal Nayak* (*The Villain*, 1993), *Baazigar* (*Trickster*, 1993), and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (*Who Am I to You*, 1994).

The Oral Contours of the Conventional Hindi Film

I. Pastiche and Preservation

One of the broadest psychodynamic characteristics of orally based thought is the tendency toward the additive rather than the subordinative. Without the ability to write, to store, and to organize information elsewhere than the brain, the possibility of developing structural cohesiveness, of manipulating a story for tight shape and flow—especially as regards lengthy narrative—is impossible. Indeed, the "analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing"¹² arises *with writing itself*. Without writing, meticulously sculpting a sentence—let alone an entire plot—is quite impossible. Oral narratives are hence, by noetic necessity, episodic, sequential, and additive in nature. Works such as the *Mahabharata* and African oral epic are not built upward into some kind of pyramidal form, but are rather constructed around techniques like the use of flashbacks, thematic recurrences, and chrono-



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"Breaking for the past": Sanjeev Kumar, Dharmendra, and Amitabh Bachchan in *Sholay*

logical breaks. This is because these are the only ways to handle extended narrative, to keep it manageable, memorable, and uncomplicated. For this reason, orally inscribed narrative—and this includes Bombay cinema—often has the feeling of being piecemeal and disaggregative, of being coarsely stitched together. It is pastiche—but quite without the postmodern self-consciousness.

One of these oral structural devices in particular, the flashback, deserves consideration. Its prevalence in oral epic is due in large part to its facilitating a movement between data more easily transmittable in separate containers. To be sure, the oft described "boxes within boxes"¹³ feel of oral epic arises to a large degree from the repeated use of the flashback. In the Hindi film, we are constantly transported back and forth and back again in time—between various storage spaces, so to speak—to watch the playing out of this romance or that crisis. In *Sholay*, for instance, there is a police chief's story-within-story recollection of meeting two thieves whom he plans now to hire to execute his vengeance; this is followed by a protracted flashback to the chief's once idyllic family life and also its tragic ruination at the hand of the film's villain, Gabbar Singh; and finally by a third flashback portraying the once exuberant, spirited life-force of the police chief's daughter-in-law, who is now reduced to forlorn widowhood.

In the more recent *Khal Nayak*, we straggle in and out of a rough, crude underworld tale, a Rama and Sita-type love story, not to mention a mother-son melodrama, stalling on several occasions to voyage back in time and witness the childhood experiences that led to the protagonist's transformation into a heinous villain, as well as the traumatic aftermath of that particular metamorphosis on the boy's upright family.

As with lengthy oral narrative, in the typical Hindi film there are also numerous sidetracks or “parallel skits” that, unlike subplots, have little to no bearing on the major story line. These digressions may be fun, funny, maudlin, titillating, even gruesome, but they are neither particularly revealing of character nor narratively instrumental. Much like the African oral epic, where episodes of, say, horror or comedy are developed for their independent appeal,¹⁴ Hindi film is rife with stand-alone sketches and deviations, often of a humorous or violent nature and similarly amplified for full effect. In *Sholay*, one finds a solid 15 minutes of the first half dedicated to the two goodhearted anti-heroes’ extraneous gambol through a prison sentence. In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, the servants’ vaudevillian mishaps take the spectator down a narrative blind alley for the sheer enjoyment of it. And certainly this collective willingness to digress is reflected in the obligatory song-and-dance numbers that punctuate, sometimes puncture, virtually every conventional Bollywood movie.

To be sure, the Hindi film is often derided by film scholars and critics for its stringy and episodic nature, for its lack of an “organic consistency.”¹⁵ Sometimes this lack of any organizing principle, this constant detouring and often lengthy meandering, is kindly attributed to its imitating indigenous precursors like the *Mahabharata*. But, rather than paying tribute to or being modeled on ancient tales, the Hindi film and the earlier oral epics are, I believe, cognate with respect to form. (Certainly many of the characteristics of the Hindi film that have been dubbed “indigenously Indian” by critics are also common to oral performance and orally based narrative irrespective of national or cultural boundaries.) Other similarities seem to bolster this point—like a second broad psychodynamic characteristic common to orality: the commitment to a conservative-traditionalist rather than experimental mind-set.

Whereas the literate mind-set looks toward experimentation in storytelling, that is, toward the achievement of something different, original, and unique, the oral mind-set inhibits such thought experimentation. As Ong points out, this is because a mind that must be the holder of all things is naturally inclined toward pragmatism and conservatism, not toward speculation and discovery.¹⁶ Originality (as the literate mind understands that term) necessitates an ability to move away from the original via notes, or books, or a computer screen—to leave a work, or a body of work, in order to change it. But if one *cannot* leave the original for fear of losing it altogether (and hence of losing the

self that is carried forward through time), then such movements are resisted, are in fact self-annihilating. So any contemporary shifts in social relations, any tensions *du jour*, even the jazzy emergence of fads and technologies, are less “touted for their novelty” than synchronically “presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors.”¹⁷ In other words, the new is invariably incorporated into the old (and in some manner, the “forever”), resulting in a kind of mythic “telescoping” of temporalities, as social psychologist Ashis Nandy has perceptively identified with reference to Hindi film.¹⁸ In *Khal Nayak*, for instance, we find that the modern pursuit of a terrorist via cell phones, helicopters, and fast cars ends with a simple, coherent (and some might say, regressive) return to mythic patterns and human relations—not to mention clear-cut allusions to the epic *Ramayana*. And in *Baazigar*, the contemporary city setting naturally segues by the film’s end to ancient ruins and deep-rooted principles regarding family obligation and honor.

Relatedly, because the fabric of oneself in oral cultures is transmitted by word of mouth, from one person to another, from the previous generation to the next, what this also implies is that self-preservation is an inherently *collective* affair, a group endeavor. As a result, communal structures of personality are fostered, with things being “we”-inflected rather than “I”-inflected.¹⁹ (Indeed, the assertion of *individual* rights, as Marshall McLuhan has noted, appears only with the rise of print.²⁰) Certainly this is applicable to the Bombay film industry, which specializes in “we”-inflected dramas that consistently and continuously conserve the traditional order. The movies, like the oral epics before them, ensure that the way things *are* is, in the end, restored—and triumphantly so. The emphasis is similarly on the preservation of the ordered society, which is considered in oral narrative the “highest good and goal toward which the hero’s physical and intellectual development is bent.”²¹ This is not to say that there cannot be all measure of disruption, disorder, and discord during the course of a story—through displays of intergenerational aggression, say, or the transgressing of civilly sanctioned boundaries. But, by the end, the existing social order must be preserved. Those who have gone amiss must be punished, banished, or destroyed, or prove themselves certifiably penitent, for only such actions can ensure that the “communal self” is not atomized.²²

So, in *Mother India*, we have Nargis shooting her wayward son rather than allowing him to run roughshod over the ethics of their community. In *Sholay*, it is Gabbar Singh who is eliminated, with the village

The “we”-inflected universe of *Mother India*

returned to the good management of the police chief. In *Khal Nayak*, the villain, awash in sudden moral conviction, surrenders before the *city* is returned to the good management of the police chief. And in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, where no villains exist, two families—united by a marriage that has since terminated due to a death—are wedded together again by another marriage within the same family. All ends happily because in effect all ends *just as it started*.

Though it is true that these resolutions are to some degree shaped by censorship codes—and are therefore taken by some analysts to be a metaphoric if not blatantly pro-state product of government intervention—the fact that such endings are firmly anticipated by audiences implies a deeper *raison d'être*. After all, audiences are publicly known to *reject* films that do not uphold the status quo; and in light of the findings in orality studies, it seems quite feasible that the embrace of such patriotic (sometimes even jingoistic) overtones is in actual fact a modern extension of the oral mind-set's conservatism as regards the communal self. What else could explain the unwavering embrace by audiences in Ghana and Turkey of *Mother India* despite its blatantly nationalistic ardor?

But what then is there if originality and uniqueness are eschewed? Certainly Homer was inventive and artful in his poetic enterprises. Still, his was a different kind of artfulness—not to mention a kind similarly attributable to the Bombay cinema. For Hindi films, like the oral epics that preceded them,²³ manipulate *public* stories. They too creatively refashion a flotilla of formulae and themes that an audience has come to know and expect. Additions and alterations are of course

made, but to material that is already part of a collective storehouse of experience and knowledge.

This then explains the Hindi film spectators' acceptance of, if not preference for, formula films that the slightly contemptuous critic might term inflexibly redundant and endlessly repetitive of themes and story lines, and the more sympathetic critic might characterize as possessing a kind of *déjà-vu*-ness.²⁴ And it is true: when one sinks into a Bollywood theater seat, one can predict with a fair amount of accuracy some of the elements or motifs of the story about to be encountered: there will be the flowering of a romantic love, followed by a romantic crisis most likely spurred by a villain (perhaps a parent or really malicious felon); there will be the distress of a mother, the sacrifice of a son; an oath; vengeance; malefactors punished and social injustices put right by the hero; and the romantic couple reunited and the community victoriously returned to its harmonious state.

Perhaps you are here reminded of Vladimir Propp's analysis of the narrative structure of fairy tales. Indeed, analysts have often labeled Hindi films “fairy tales,” or “myths,”²⁵ and this is largely because this kind of storytelling is, to literate minds, profoundly ahistorical, exhibiting a tendency to fly in the face of “realism,” to revert to fantasy endings. But if we take into account how the oral mind-set must synthesize all experience into a present story—that is, that each tale in the telling must be a repository of the past, and “a resource for renewing awareness of present existence”²⁶—then Hindi film's sameness, its repetition, its aforementioned telescoping of temporalities, makes complete sense. In this case, the storyteller's art lies in



A joyous (and orally inscribed) “cinema of attractions”: the joint family of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (above); Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit (right), with plot-pivotal dog Tuffy



being able to entwine the old formulas and themes with the new, in being able to “read” the audience’s desire for the novel from *within* “a deep sense of tradition, which preserves the essential meaning of stories.”²⁷

If we are willing to concede that the films’ formulaic nature, their grand-scale redundancy, is born of their orally inscribed communal nature—of their being a public, as opposed to private, property—then another peculiar characteristic of Hindi films is explained: their proclivity for quoting one another. That is to say, there are incessant references in Hindi films to prior films, an endless borrowing-cum-stealing of previous movies’ tunes, lyrics, dialogue, iconic props, whole characters, and sometimes even entire plots.²⁸ In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, for example, the characters assemble one evening to play an extended (in terms of screen time, at least) game in which they recite passages, sing songs, and dialogically act out complete scenes from other movies (including *Sholay*). *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* has itself been referenced, used, and abused in at least half a dozen movies since that film’s 1994 release, by way of reprised melodies, quoted lines, borrowed costumes, embezzled props heavy with sentimental weight, and even one farcical send-up of a musical number. In Hollywood, some of these strategies would indubitably result in hefty legal suits. But the concept of plagiarism, of idea-ownership, is a consequence of literacy, more specifically of print.²⁹ In the oral universe, there is no such thing. One cannot steal what belongs to the collective consciousness of the group. Of course, such pilfering is not only for the purpose of repeating knowledge in order that it live on and maintain its relevancy; repetition is also “a token of the joy of

recollection.”³⁰ The viewer, in other words, joins in a highly *participatory* event, an overtly shared memory-event that is pleasurable precisely because it is continuous with other films, not separate from them.

2. The Good, the Bad, and the Wordy

There are other characteristics of orally inscribed narrative which may be less broad, but which play out with equal significance in the Hindi film. Their reasons for being may perhaps be evoked best in the form of a question: If one must store information exclusively in the mind, how must a story—with its transitory oral utterances—be executed so that it can be thus stored? In the Hindi film, the answers are manifested in two ways: verbally (as one might expect), and also visually.

One of the traits of oral performance, of oral cultures even, is agonistic delivery. That is, there exists the tendency to perform verbally in a manner that is, by literate turns of phrases, dynamic, thick, excessive, or flatulent. This is because knowledge in the oral world, incapable as it is of being disengaged from the act, is situated within the “context of struggle.”³¹ Knowledge exists *in* the speaking—as outward display, as event; and as such, it necessarily “engage[s] others in verbal and intellectual combat.”³²

This is certainly not hard to discern in the conventional Bollywood film, where actors do not so much talk as spout, orate, and hyperbolically perorate, and where success is wholly in the *doing* of things. Heroes and heroines have no problem talking out loud to themselves; but their discussions are neither about nor demand from an audience anything that is analytical,



Vengeance in *Sholay*: Kumar and Amjad Khan (as super-villain Gabbar Singh)

self-reflective, or categorizationally abstract. Talking and existing is fully tied to the operational world.³³ As Nandy has averred, though without connecting it to orality, Hindi films are “anti-psychological”; there is no “interior” story. Nothing exists within a character that is not said. And so, when the police chief in *Sholay* wants vengeance, he expresses himself in the form of a highly dramatized oath, full of bravura and overstated spite. And when in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* there is a discussion of familial ethics, it is housed not in personal admissions or intimate confessions, but in publicly shared truths or memories—that is, in clichés, in proverbs, in forms of utterances that are guarded against change because they render knowledge easily transportable.

It is rare, in fact, to find a Hindi film that has not, by its denouement, skidded into language that is noticeably aphoristic. For example, in *Baazigar*, just prior to that film’s violent showdown, the protagonist declares imperiously to his fiancée about her diabolical father: “You have only seen the crown on his head. Look under the thief’s sleeve and you will find blood.” We then witness in flashback the pitiful aftermath of her father’s depravity (i.e., his father and sister are dead, his mother stricken with dementia). When we return to the present, it is to the protagonist informing his betrothed with axiomatic import: “You have only been pricked with a thorn. I have been wounded with a trident.” Some literate minds may find such dialogue platitudinous, even embarrassing, but that is only because long-term exposure to print has engendered an anxious need to be original, to shun clichés.

Agonistic display in oral narrative (and cultures) manifests itself in other ways, too. Because of the give-and-take nature of oral communications—the fact

that all knowledge must pass through word of mouth—interpersonal relationships are generally kept high.³⁴ In order to render interaction memorable, then, physical behavior is presented in a fashion that is celebrated, exaggerated, even extreme. In Homer, for instance, one finds enthusiastic portrayals of gross physical violence: of “slaughtered corpses” and “bloody filth,” and of “jaws glistening, dripping red,” as “brazen spearhead[s] smash [their] way clean through below the brain in an upward stroke.”³⁵ As for the *Mahabharata*, who doesn’t shudder at Bhima’s placing his foot upon the throat of his enemy, so that he might rip open his breast and drink his warm lifeblood? The same applies to Hindi film, where, stagy as they may be, fight scenes are grisly and blood-soaked, with lurid sound effects enhancing the kung-fu kicks, snapped limbs, gruesome impalings, and glass panes literally shattering and plunging “clean through below the brain in an upward stroke.” In the protracted 12-minute showdown of *Baazigar*, for instance, an already embattled, blood-soaked Shah Rukh Khan downs seven savage thugs twice his size, is choked once, thrown against a wall twice, finally is skewered (in slo-mo)—and still lives long enough to crawl into his mother’s lap, where he can die in maudlin, regressed, and oratorical splendor.

But this is the case not only for antagonistic interchanges; it is equally so for approbatory ones. One finds equal cinematic energy invested in extravagant praise and an unabashed—and to literate minds, overripe—glorification of others: of stoic mothers and sacrificing sons, of virtuous daughters and pals-for-life. For instance, in *Sholay*, we find the two male leads racing down a rural road on a motorcycle, declaring boisterously in song, “This friendship will never be destroyed; we’d sooner die than let that occur”; and in *Khal Nayak*, the villain’s “Ma,” cast here as the receptacle of all goodness and the mute bearer of all ills, is exalted on several occasions—including during an argument, within a sentimental song, and even between the punches of a fistfight.

Amplification and polarization—and their inevitable by-product, melodrama—are also part and parcel of the characters who inhabit orally inscribed narrative. Colorless personalities—characters who are quiet, still, delicately nuanced—cannot survive in such a world. They must, like the mnemonic phrases of an oral epic, be organized into some kind of form that will render them permanently memorable. Hence Bollywood is populated by one-dimensional, oversized, and inflated personalities who can be classified (almost mnemonically) into stereotypes such as “wicked

dacoits” and “beautiful village girls,” or “victimized mothers” and “millionaire’s sons.” They are big, they are brash, they are epic. They stand out from the background; they cannot belong to it. (In fact, Indian movie stars—who, for many spectators, have a status akin to that of gods—themselves tend to stand out from the roles they are inhabiting, with most stars playing the same “mnemonic personality” over and over again.)

Of course, one might also say that the background itself stands out, in the sense that these stories are always enacted on sets that are optically excessive, visually voluble. The Hindi film universe is, after all, one of sprawling mansions and evildoer hideaways that smack of Disneyland, of idyllic villages inhabited by people who sport spangled costumes of crisp, clean silk. The real is discarded in favor of the grand, which is certainly more memorable. Fantasy—or, rather, the fanciful, the cinematically resplendent and utopian—though indubitably speaking to an audience’s desire for escape from a much less fanciful existence, also fortifies sights and sounds, rendering them less forgettable. The same could be said for the Hindi film’s propensity for amplified camerawork, such as its heavy, but never ironic, use of multiple zooms-in on a heroine’s horrified look, or its rapid encirclings of the leading man in trouble. Though perhaps excessive and overwrought to the literate mind, such emphatic cinematography provides cues to the spectator that are easy to read, and so to remember—a modern-day extension, perhaps, of the oral epic’s reliance on clichés.

Finally, there is the Hindi film’s commitment to a Manichean world, one where a highly polarized good and evil are pitted against each other, and where good (that is, the collectively agreed-upon moral order of the world) beats out—virtually without exception—all dark, destructive forces.³⁶ This should not be surprising, given the reliance on outsized characters who are themselves heavily polarized, the focus on exterior exploits rather than interior consciousness, and the inclination toward the preservation of the existing social structure. This aspect too can be explained when one looks to the structures and performative aspects of orality. For, in an oral universe, the memory cannot retain information that is not sufficiently amplified; nor can the individual afford trajectories that do not pragmatically bolster collective survival. Thus, for very good reason, the ambiguities of existence, the nuances of the psychological self, the grayness of the moral universe, the ordinariness of human life—all those characteristics to which texts circumscribed by literacy are so rigorously devoted—are here rarely to be found.

Oral Cinema Beyond India

If characteristics of oral performance and orally transmitted narratives were reflected more subtly or less numerous in the Hindi film, it would not be possible to argue that the industry has been largely contoured by the particular cognitive needs of its spectators. But the fact that so many appear so prominently, so resiliently, suggests theoretical legitimacy. Of course, this does not imply that there are not other historical, cultural, or aesthetic influences on the form and content of India’s popular cinema and on its success outside national borders. But, certainly it seems that, up to this point, orality’s contouring of the Hindi film has been fairly substantial. Further, many of the Bollywood movie’s perceived inconsistencies and oft-cited contradictions as a text and practice actually make sense when examined through the prism of orality.

But what about beyond the borders of India? There are other nations that cater to audiences with large non-literate, or low-literate, or linguistically diverse populations; and wouldn’t one expect to find national cinemas elsewhere that pay inadvertent heed to the noetic requirements and expectations of their audiences? Certainly. However, there is as yet no similar work on other national cinemas whose roots may have been, or whose existence continues to be, inspired or constrained by an invisibly represented body of spectators. Still, some important evidence from secondary sources seems to confirm the theoretical claim being made here. For instance, in *Planet Hong Kong*, David Bordwell commences his study of Chinese popular cinema with a detailed description of its “distinct aesthetic.”³⁷ Though apparently unacquainted with the movies’ oral underpinnings, he describes the form and energies of that mass entertainment as being: (i) non-contemplative, (ii) non-realist, (iii) “Manichean,” (iv) loosely plotted (and of “kaleidoscopic variety”), (v) kinesthetically arousing, (vi) flashback-using, (vii) tradition-refining (as opposed to originality-seeking), (viii) favoring formulas and clichés, (ix) brutal in their violence, (x) plagiaristic, and (xi) possessing a tendency to “swerve into a happy ending.”³⁸ I can think of no better support from an impartial outside source than this, and would propose that the common “aesthetic” shared by these two cinematic forms suggests that orality might prove a worthy departure point from which to analyze the cultural, aesthetic, and sociopolitical vicissitudes of various visual media worldwide.

In fact, witnessing orality’s vivid circumscription of one nation’s cinema assists in exposing its more



Nargis in *Mother India*—status: “star” . . . and quo

subtle and sometimes splintered forms elsewhere: in Egyptian cinema, and in the Italian peplums (mythic “sword and sandal” movies) of the 1940s and 50s, and Hollywood blockbusters, like *Titanic*, *Rambo*, and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*; in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books and Japanese *manga*; in Doordarshan’s *Ramayana* mini-series, Mexican *telenovelas*, and American serials like *Xena: Warrior Princess*; even in MTV and the current spate of popular video games. In other words, narrative heavily inscribed by orality still persists, even within societies that are ostensibly highly literate. It is not a disappearing phenomenon, only a migratory one.

But with regard to the primary audience with which I have been dealing, that is, those of a subaltern status, certainly the new discovery of this transcultural identity has repercussions as regards social inclusion. For programs or movies that the literate-minded tout as superior, meaningful, or original, as being about something *real*, about something that *matters*, may speak more to an individual’s literate biases, of his or her literate construction of the world, than to what constitutes an authentic or valid—or even real—representation.

Once, not too long ago, a rhetorical question was formulated, one that has now grown quite famous: Who speaks for the subaltern?³⁹ We might modify that question somewhat in relation to the media and this invisible marker of identity, and ask: Who speaks in the *language* of the subaltern, so that his representation can be self-accessed and her identification assured? After all, can we rightly say that a media image is “representing,” if the spectator it is representing is from the outset noetically excluded from comprehending it?

Of course, with respect to Hindi popular film, one might contend that the subaltern has been speaking all

along, and that perhaps it is the built-in limitation of the intellectual community, with its critical imprimatur derived exclusively from *literate* thought and perception, which has caused it to miss this fact—or, at the least, caused it to read only with ideological curiosity and stringent concern what has in fact been a form of subaltern self-constitution.

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Notes

1. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983).
2. See Brian Larkin, “Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities,” *Africa*, vol. 67, no. 3 (1997), 406-40; and “Bollywood Comes to Nigeria,” in *Samar* 8, Winter/Spring (1997).
3. See Carla Power and Sudip Mazumdar, “Bollywood Goes Global,” *Newsweek*, February 28, 2000. Online. July 26, 2002. <<http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/nw-srv/printed/int/socu/a16653-2000feb21.htm>>. 6 pp.
4. For those interested in other perspectives on the Hindi popular film and its *raisons d'être*, see, amongst others, Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Fareed Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imagining a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999); Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Ravi Vasudevan, ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also of value is the 1981 edition of *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (New Delhi: India International Centre, 1981), and the various film-related writings of Sara Dickey, Wimal Dissanayake, Ashis Nandy, and Rosie Thomas.
5. Some of these characteristics of orally based narrative as reflected in Hindi film were first presented in Sheila J. Nayar, “The Impact of Orality on Indian Popular Cinema,” *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2001), 121-54.
6. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). I draw extensively on Ong, and it should be noted that his book consolidates and systematizes the orality-related theories and ideas of many scholars, including his own. Other significant (sometimes inadvertent) contributors to the field upon whose work his own book is based include Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, A.R. Luria, Marshall McLuhan, and Milman Parry. As per-

- tains to this project, see especially Goody and Ian Watt's (eds.) groundbreaking and indispensable *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1968)—especially their introductory essay, "The Consequences of Literacy"; McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); and the many (oft anthologized) essays by Eric Havelock, including "Some Elements of the Homeric Fantasy," in *Homer's Iliad*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987). Also of great value and influence have been Isidore Okpewho's *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and David Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds., *Literacy and Orality* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), in which appears, amongst other valuables, another Havelock essay, "The Oral-Literate Equation: A Formula for the Modern Mind."
7. The best means of confirming this claim is simply to surf the Internet. Sites exploring orality and literacy's interface with the new language of cyberspace abound—especially as they reify, substantiate, or intersect with Ong's claim of a new age of *secondary orality*: a programmatic kind of orality induced by electronic technology, and one more "deliberate and self-conscious," given its being "based permanently on the use of writing and print." Ong, 136.
 8. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).
 9. Ong, 2.
 10. *Ibid.*, 105.
 11. Scholar in the cognitive science of learning and instruction Laura Resnick describes this "higher order of thinking" as a cluster of interrelated activities that permits one the ability to yield *multiple solutions* and to make *nuanced judgments* (the emphases are hers); to apply *multiple criteria* and to deal with *uncertainty*—all in a manner that is *nonalgorithmic and complex*, in that the process can neither be specified nor always rendered "visible." Further, such thinking is defined by an *effortful* ability to *self-regulate* the thinking process and to *impose meaning* (3). As Resnick acknowledges, such "higher order goals are nothing new. They represent what might be called the 'high literacy' strand in the education of history" (3). This is of course not to suggest that there cannot be complexity or subtlety to oral people's thinking, but rather that theirs is architecturally fashioned out of different needs and circumstances. For more, see Resnick, *Education and Learning to Think* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987). Online. August 17, 2002. <www.nap.edu>.
 12. *Ibid.*, 37.
 13. Cedric Whitman made this observation vis-à-vis the *Iliad*, noting—as Ong summarizes—that the epic was "built like a Chinese puzzle." Ong, 27.
 14. Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*, 209.
 15. Vijay Mishra, "Decentering History: Some Versions of Bombay Cinema," *East-West Film Journal*, vol. 6, no. 1, January (1992): 112.
 16. Ong, 41-42.
 17. *Ibid.*, 42.
 18. Ashis Nandy, "The Popular Hindi Film: Ideology and First Principles," *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1981): 91.
 19. *Ibid.*, 69.
 20. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 220.
 21. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 36.
 22. According to Manthia Diawara, the tales of African *griots* also consistently conclude with a "restoration of traditional order." See his "Oral Literature and African Film: Narratology in Wend Kuuni," in *Questions of Third Cinema*, Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 201.
 23. Ong, 36, 60.
 24. It is Nandy, 90, who contends that Hindi film audiences are expected to know a film's major elements by heart and, in this way, experience *déjà vu*.
 25. See especially Sudhir Kakar, "The Ties that Bind: Family Relationships in the Mythology of Hindi Cinema," *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1981): 11-22.
 26. Ong, 98.
 27. Walter Ong, "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style," *PMLA*, vol. 80, no. 3 (1965): 149.
 28. Certainly, one might say that these films are intertextual. But they are intertextual only in the manner that *all* language is intertextual. The term, as it is utilized in current critical parlance, permits us no real latitude here, as it applies too stringently to written texts—to literature and "modern poetic language," as Julia Kristeva terms it in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
 29. Ong, *Orality*, 130-33.
 30. Okpewho, 154.
 31. Ong, *Orality*, 44.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. The psychologist A.R. Luria noted the absence and/or non-privileging of these cognitive qualities and features in the illiterate Russian peasants he interviewed in the Soviet Union, from 1931-32. See Ong, *Orality*, 49-57.
 34. *Ibid.*, 45.
 35. Homer, in Okpewho, 209.
 36. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule; see, for instance, the classic *Pyaasa* (*The Thirsty One*, 1957), or the more recent *Satya* (*Truth*, 1998). However, of the 100 or so films of the past two decades that qualify as hits or super-hits, not a single one that I have seen actually "transgresses" this moral-order imperative.
 37. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.
 38. *Ibid.*, 2-20.
 39. Spivak, 271.

Abstract This paper posits that the formula for India's popular cinema (a.k.a. "Bollywood"—the Hollywood of Bombay) has been fundamentally contoured by the psychodynamics of orality, i.e., by the thought processes and personality structures that distinguish a non-writerly mindset and its narrative creations. Analyses of several Bollywood hits from the past half-century illustrate how.

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²⁷ **Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style**

Walter J. Ong

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